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Matter of Fact . . . .

The Escape of Richard Nixon

By Joseph Alsop

CHICAGO—The great event of this convention is not the nomination of Richard M. Nixon, which was inevitable or even Nixon's surprise alliance with Nelson A. Rockefeller, which was urgently necessary. The great event is the Vice President's escape from the President.

Alsop

The exact character of Nixon's relationship with Dwight D. Eisenhower has always been difficult to discern. But two elements in Nixon's view of Mr. Eisenhower have long been quite easily discernible.

On the one hand, Nixon has always chafed at Eisenhower's almost total neglect of the basic but humdrum tasks of political leadership. From start to finish, Mr. Eisenhower never made any attempt to rebuild and modernize the delapidated Republican Party. The result is the Party one sees at this convention, which grumbles at Nixon's "left-wing" tendencies, and stands lower in the polls than the Republicans have ever stood since the Landon debacle in 1936.

On the other hand, Nixon has also chafed for years at the Eisenhower Panglossian doctrine that "all is for the best in this best of possible worlds"—except, of course, that American defense costs and taxes are much too high. If Nixon had ever been free to speak out on defense and foreign policy; he would now be classed as one of the pessimists whom the President so angrily denounced as "Job's boils."

Nixon was not free to speak out because of important constitutional changes which have received too little attention. In the past—until the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in fact—our Vice Presidents were always treated as mere spare parts. The main change in the Vice President's position since then has not consisted, either, in the new tendency to invest [illegible]

THE REAL CHANGE has arisen from the admission of the Vice President to the inner sanctum of policy making. As a regular attendant at the National Security Council, the Vice President hears all the most secret arguments about the adequacy or inadequacy of the defense effort, for instance. Hence he is a prisoner. He must either refuse to sit on the Security Council, or he must suit his public position to the position taken by the President.

Nixon was quite understandably not ready to make the kind of open break involved in leaving the Security Council—at least until he had the presidential nomination safely in hand. He would have preferred to plaster over the differences between him and Mr. Eisenhower until the empty convention rituals were over. But Gov. Rockefeller forced his pace. Nixon's real views were therefore incorporated in the platform. And Mr. Eisenhower is as cross as two sticks, above all about the Nixon-Rockefeller defense plank.

AS THE NOMINEE, nonetheless, Nixon has escaped at last from his vice presidential imprisonment. He can strike a new note. He can say what he really thinks. The degree in which he feels free to do so will be revealed by the contrast between the Eisenhower farewell speech and the Nixon acceptance speech. Mr. Eisenhower sounded like—exactly like the Eisenhower of the years of deceptive calm, before the luck began to turn. Nixon is beginning to sound not very unlike Sen. John F. Kennedy.

In fact, a member of the Nixon staff is authority for the report that the Nixon acceptance speech would have been entitled "New Frontiers," if Kennedy had not grabbed the phrase first.

This does not mean, of course, that Nixon will repudiate the Eisenhower record. On the contrary, he will defend the record as best he can, although with little relish in certain policy areas such as defense. Nixon knows that a successor-candidate cannot escape from running on the record of the predecessor-administration. Adlai E. Stevenson tried to do so in 1952, and all Stevenson got for his pains was a bad case of political hernia.

But the really significant national debate will not concern the past. It will concern what must be done next. In this respect, Nixon's freedom is now total.

It is a fortunate thing for the country that this would be so. It is time to talk about hard, even harsh truths with the hard realism that both Nixon and Kennedy possess. There was a case, perhaps, for tranquilizing leadership in 1952. In the era of the McCarthy nastiness, a national Miltown was in order. But in 1960, the approach that Richard Nixon promises is the approach we need.

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25 YEAR RE-REVIEW
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